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ABSTRACT

In its present form, distance education overcomes the situational (geographic and/or time) barriers to education faced by consumers because of their family and work responsibilities. Disadvantaged adults often experience additional dispositional (attitude) and cultural barriers that are not well addressed by distance programs. Making distance education more responsive to the needs of isolated disadvantaged learners requires solving the following problems: lack of social context and holistic teaching and learning techniques; prohibitive entry requirements, course prerequisites, and assumed skills; and irrelevant curriculum. Steps that can be taken immediately to make distance education more viable for disadvantaged learners include: articulate a clear mission giving some priority to disenfranchised groups; collect data on constituents; develop realistic learning objectives; agree to sacrifice some institutional precedents to humane student-centered programs; give learners a role in planning/directing programs; relate course offerings to the practical needs of disadvantaged people; make job training within the community a priority; pay particular attention to women learners in science- and math-based subject areas; make appropriate support services an integral part of distance education; integrate a tolerant, user-friendly perspective into all curriculum planning; and provide a social context for learning. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR DISADVANTAGED ADULTS

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DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR DISADVANTAGED ADULTS

Among trends affecting adult education in the United States are: 1) increasing numbers of non-immigrant minorities, 2) an influx of immigrants from Asia and South America, 3) structural trends affecting employment, including more women wage earners, and 4) technology. Of particular challenge to adult educators are large numbers of minority, immigrant, disabled, and rural adults who lack the skills and education necessary to be productive members of society.

Socioeconomic background is a greater determinant of education outcomes than culture. However, minority, immigrant, disabled, and rural adults often cluster in the lowest economic strata of society, making it difficult to separate cultural issues from social and economic ones. Access and equity in education are problems for all marginalized adults and certain groups are disproportionately represented among them. These groups experience barriers to education, many of which can be overcome by distance delivery of instruction. However, distance education, more through default than design, tends to ignore disadvantaged learners in favor of more educated, affluent ones.

This discussion i) defines how distance education agendas are determined, ii) discusses education barriers faced by disadvantaged adults, iii) lists advantages and iv) disadvantages of distance education for certain individuals and groups, and, finally, v) identifies immediate changes that have potential to orient distance education toward disenfranchised learners.

THE DISTANCE EDUCATION AGENDA

Distance education usually resides in colleges and universities through extended or continuing studies departments. These departments may be all or partially self-supporting and, while they have the resources to explore alternate delivery, are rarely committed to social parity. In fact, many in higher education suffer the illusion that distance programs defuse the caste system of economically, geographically, and socially privileged individuals who have easy access to education. It is often believed that equity is served because access is increased. More likely, however, as Rumble (1986) pointed out, distance programs in higher education are concerned with increasing the efficacy of the institution as a purveyor of mass education. Social agendas in distance programming, if they exist, dissuade the demands of tax payers for more

convenience rather than provide education for disempowered groups of learners, and distance education is outside the purview of social activists. There are no placard carrying altruists demanding distance education for the disadvantaged. Distance delivery is overlooked in the demands for better job training and services to the disabled.

Unfortunately, even individuals in position to advocate for change in distance education don't. Program planners are often motivated by profit. Teachers in adult basic education and faculty committed to cultural plurality are seldom represented in distance programs. Involved faculty are understandably stolid about outreach. Tenure policies do not reward brilliance in alternate delivery of instruction (Sherritt, 1993). Time away from other responsibilities, including family time, is resented by faculty who teach evening and weekend distance classes (Caffarella, Duning, Patrick, 1992). Thus, educators most likely to advocate for disenfranchised adults don't and those least oriented toward the needs of under represented groups are more often engaged in teaching at a distance. Consequently, there is no forum for rural, minority, disabled, or immigrant adult learners in distance education.

EDUCATION BARRIERS

Resources

Within the culture of poverty there is never enough time, money, or energy. Physically punishing, psychically draining work, inadequate diet and health care, lack of transportation and child care are among resource barriers faced by impoverished immigrants, minorities, and rural adults. Disabled adults have their own set of problems. Proactive orientation toward education does not come without considerable encouragement and assistance which, in distance programs, is not forthcoming even for the most highly motivated students.

Extended Family and Gender

Many minority and immigrant cultures are collective. Individuals within these cultures, women particularly, do not comfortably leave home to attend classes. Child care is a pervasive problem. Also, the demands of community or clan may interfere with study. For example, participation in ceremonies and rituals is expected of traditional American Indians (Spronk and Radtke, 1988). Economics play a big role as well. In some rural communities, subsistence agriculture is essential to a family's welfare. Productive adults cannot easily leave their fields to take classes.

Empirical data from developing countries list family responsibilities as the most inhibiting of all education barriers for women (Faith, 1988). Many American women have similar priorities because they are i) poor, ii) traditional, iii) geographically or socially isolated, and iv) subject to male dominance. A Canadian study (Faith, 1988) discovered that women students were frequently discouraged by influential men from pursuing education. Women in poverty, like their more fortunate sisters, suffer anxiety and guilt when using family resources to advance their own goals. Unlike their affluent counterparts, however, poor minority, immigrant and rural women have little support for their efforts and few resources to assist them.

Individualism

American education is competitive and individualistic. In many cultures, self aggrandizement is viewed with derision. Even the choice to become educated may mark a man or woman as self-serving and alienated from the clan. The theme of alienation pervades rural, immigrant, and minority art forms. Very often the individual who chooses to rise educationally above his/her roots creates spiritual conflict. In addition, American education rewards individual initiative which militates against the group efforts prized by many culture groups.

Language

Many languages flourish in the United States. Spanish, for instance, is common in many regions but more obscure languages are not uncommon and are even prized in some places. Instruction in Japanese, for instance, became very important in Dublin, Ohio when a large Honda plant was built there. Thus, language is both a barrier to learning and a means of upward mobility. No type of education program is better equipped for bilingual instruction and economic use of less commonly used languages than distance.

Isolation

The literature confuses *urban* with *minority*. Certainly, some minority groups aggregate in big cities but there are minority groups living in isolated mountain ranges, herding sheep in lonely places and eking out livings on small farms. There are immigrants, such as the Hmong in

Chicago and Central American migrant workers in the Midwest, so linguistically and psychologically isolated that they may as well be in the hinterlands. Disabled adults are often isolated in the midst of hordes. Isolation, in fact, is a common barrier shared by those outside the mainstream of education and life regardless of where they live.

SUMMARY

Most distance education consumers suffer geographic and time constraints due to family and work responsibilities. Distance education overcomes these situational barriers and well serves adults who experience them. While disadvantaged adults also suffer situation barriers, they may experience additional dispositional (attitude) and cultural ones that are not well addressed by distance programs. Cross (1979) pointed out: "Public policy decisions may encourage further removal of institutional barriers, but the major challenge for policy makers lies in better understanding of dispositional barriers" (p. 112). Until these more abstruse barriers are addressed, disadvantaged adults, whether urban or rural, face serious education impediments.

ADVANTAGES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR ISOLATED DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS

With appropriate changes, distance education is better suited than traditional delivery of instruction to overcome barriers to education cited above. Distance delivery can achieve the following:

- Eliminate the need for learners to be in a strange place at a particular time;
- Remove impediments to participation by women;
- Offer instruction via multiple languages and make economic and didactic use of less common languages;
- Reach across geographic boundaries;
- Be iconoclastic, using bold approaches to education;
- Make education a family and clan matter by reaching into homes and communities;
- Provide opportunities for higher education and technician level training to those unable to pursue traditional programs;

- Reflect the cultural and economic exigencies of a community;
- Provide access and equity for learners outside the mainstream.
- Establish collaborative networks of service providers and employers not necessarily in physical proximity to each other.

DISADVANTAGES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR UNDER REPRESENTED GROUPS

Need for Technological Competence

Information technology may create a privileged class of users. It remains to be seen whether technology will overcome barriers for disadvantaged learners or create new ones (Rubenson, 1985). Nonetheless, even a simple mechanism, such as a speaker phone, may be highly intimidating for some potential learners.

Lack of Social Context and Holistic Teaching and Learning Techniques

Empirical data show that some cultural groups have learning orientations that are different from the norm. For example, many Hispanics, women, and Pacific Islanders are *field dependent* learners who learn best when material is presented contextually and in a social manner. Distance delivery is particularly context free and lacking in social opportunities.

Individualization is an essential component of distance education. Van Enckevort (1988) astutely wrote distance programs view: "Each student as...an individual, not a representative of a social group or a class, who could use his or her academic study in a struggle for emancipation and democratization of the class to which he or she belongs" (p. 59). Specifically, distance delivery appeals to people who want to escape from their social environments. This orientation presented problems in Australian Aboriginal education (Furler and Scott, 1988) where students expressed interest only in classes that would help their people.

Distance curricula is typically arranged around Western, rational, linear thinking and rewards those *field independent* learners who are self directed. This orientation may discourage the most gifted leaders in some communities.

Prohibitive Entry Requirements, Course Prerequisites, and Assumed Skills

Entry requirements, course prerequisites, and required skills, prohibit many educationally disadvantaged from participating in outreach programs. Such requirements are often inconsistent with real life experiences. In an illuminating study, Spronk and Radtke (1988) found that remedial skills offered at a distance did not meet the needs of targeted learners largely because the curriculum was developed for students from the dominant culture. Remedial programs with a meta-cognitive element have promise for at risk adult learners who may be ignorant about what learning and schooling include.

Irrelevant Curriculum

Under the auspices of traditional academies, distance education curriculum is more often than not irrelevant to the lives of people living in marginality. Courses such as History of Gothic Europe and Sport Psychology may hold appeal for educated people but have little to offer those within the culture of poverty. This is not to imply that traditional academic course work is inappropriate for distance programs but that relevant alternatives should have a place too.

IMMEDIATE CHANGES

The institution based education models currently used in distance education are not well suited to the needs of disadvantaged groups. Much more research is needed in this area. In the meantime, there are some changes which promise to make distance instruction more viable for isolated learners.

1. A clear mission giving some priority to disenfranchised groups must be articulated. This cannot be specious but must, instead, be a commitment to serve all adult learners, not just those able to pay high tuition or articulate their needs.

2. Data should be collected on constituents. This cannot be done from an office in academe. Planners in distance programs need to go into the communities and establish dialogue.

3. Goals should be consistent with the institutional mission while at the same time recognizing the educational priorities of all potential constituents. This is not an easy task, particularly where there are hidden agendas, such as a need for profit. However, most colleges and universities have a place for social agendas and, with some finesse, institutional and social goals can be merged. This is very important. Reaching out to under represented groups with distance delivery of instruction cannot be successful without full support from administrators and stakeholders, including business and industry leaders.

4. Learning objectives should be realistic and evaluated against pedagogic, administrative, and financial constraints. However, distance planners should advocate for change when necessary.

5. Some institutional precedents must be sacrificed to humane student centered programs. Distance programs for adults should

be grounded on research into adult learning. This suggests a learner centered paradigm that will serve all distance learners, not just the disadvantaged.

6. Learners must have some role in planning and directing their programs. Local advisory groups are helpful, as are regular efforts at communication and on going program evaluation.

7. Course offerings should relate, when feasible, to the practical needs of disadvantaged groups. Some part of distance curriculum should be dedicated to this vision. This can be as simple as adding ethnic studies classes and as complex as providing hands on experiences so women can develop the skills for technician level training.

8. Coherent programs of study, with completion certificates, are preferable to "bits and pieces" of courses of study (Treadway, 1984, p. 15).

9. Job training within the community context should be a priority; however, it should not presumed that job training is the only need in isolated communities. Family centered, intergenerational programs, classes on culture, and leadership training are excellent options for rural and ethnic communities.

10. In subject areas which are science and math based, particular attention to women learners is needed. They probably lack the conceptual and experiential background needed for technical training (Faith, 1988).

11. Minorities and women require education which empowers them in their communities so they can effect economic and social decisions which impact upon quality of life.

12. Appropriate education support services should be an integral part of distance education, particularly the use of mentors, learning groups, and remedial workshops. In addition, hands on laboratory experiences are very useful.

13. A tolerant, user friendly perspective should be integrated into all curriculum planning. Richards and Heilor (1988) define this as "non-racist, non-patronizing, and non-jargonistic" (p. 198).

14. Distance educators need professional networks to address the needs of isolated, disadvantaged learners.

15. Providing a social context for learning is extremely important for reaching some groups. Small, cohort learning groups at program delivery sites can assist in supplying it.

CONCLUSIONS

Disadvantaged, isolated learners are not well served by distance education which is usually institution, rather than learner or society centered. However, visionary distance educators realize that 1) there is need for effective education and training of disenfranchised groups and 2) future distance constituents will often derive from them. It is time to reevaluate the desultory evolution of distance education to determine what it can contribute to the real and emerging pluralistic world. There are reasons to believe that distance education can overcome education barriers for many disadvantaged individuals and groups.

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